

2 NARRATIVE



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The Fugitive (Andrew Davis, 1993), screenplay by Jeb Stuart and Jeff Twohy

AND GENRE

We begin our examination of the elements of cinema with a study of narrative, the art of constructing a story from a sequence of fictional or nonfictional events. The vast majority of films, even nonfiction films, endeavor to tell a story. And our reaction to and reading of these movies routinely begins at the level of narrative, focusing on the content of the story and the mode of its telling.

The telling of stories—aloud, in writing, on screen—is at the heart of human culture. Stories have long been a means of translating shared anxieties, hopes, and mysteries into a medium that can be communally experienced. Narrative cinema offers stories not as something we hear, or something we read, but as something we witness.

Most of the fiction films we see start with a story idea that is then developed into a screenplay, which in turn is interpreted and given form by the director, actors, designers, editors, and other members of the film's creative team. In other words, the practical development of a movie from idea through production and postproduction routinely begins with a story someone wants or even needs to tell. And the challenge for the filmmakers is to figure out a way to tell that story in an artful, entertaining, and/or compelling way.

In this chapter, we will take a close look at how narratives are constructed—the different ways that events are sequenced and connected, how narrative time operates at various levels, and how characters function and are developed through dialogue as well as action. We will also examine the concept of **film genre**, a way of categorizing films according to narrative patterns and/or emotional effects. Focusing on two popular, enduring genres (westerns and horror movies), we will see how these familiar types of stories can tap into current social trends as well as universal themes.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

2-1 Recognize and analyze the narrative structure of a film.

2-2 Understand and appreciate the narrative function of movie characters and movie stars.

2-3 Distinguish and discuss the concept of genre with regard to the structure and effect of film narrative.



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film genre A category of film based on its narrative pattern and/or emotional effect.



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JEB STUART ON SCREENWRITING

Jeb Stuart is a screenwriter who specializes in writing action films. His script credits include *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), *Another 48 Hours* (Walter Hill, 1990), *The Fugitive* (Andrew Davis, 1993), and *Blood Done Sign My Name* (Stuart, 2010). In 1994 Stuart was nominated for a Writers Guild of America award (with David Twohy) for Best Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published for *The Fugitive*.

Q1: Could you describe what a screenwriter does?

A: A screenwriter is responsible for creating a blueprint for what a movie is going to be. This blueprint has to be easy to read because the filmmakers have to know what the movie is about, who is going to be in it, how much it's going to cost, is the movie worth making?

Q2: How important is the three-act structure?

A: It's a very well-accepted tradition that a screenplay has three acts. In a three-act structure, the first thirty pages is the first act—the set-up. The next sixty pages is the second act where everything is developed, the conflict is built. Then there are the last thirty pages, which become the third act, and that's the denouement, that's where everything that's unraveled comes together in the end. You can find it in just about every movie and just about every screenplay.

Q3: John Sayles famously advises screenwriters to “write it and forget it”—suggesting that screenplays are seldom followed very closely in the development and then production of a film.

A: Filmmaking is a collaborative process. You may set sail with the boat but then other people get on board the boat. . .and sometimes the writer gets forced off the boat. So, even then, you go away thinking, well, there wouldn't be a boat without me. But if you're fortunate enough to stay with that boat until it docks, you still may not recognize the movie you were involved with every day. The actors and the director may change lines of dialogue. . .the cinematographer may decide to shoot it at night-time instead of in the day. . .the editor may decide to pick up the pace in the second act. . .one of the things I was told when I first took up screenwriting was: “If you don't like collaboration, then go write poetry.”

Q4: Movie dialogue is of course meant to be read—delivered dramatically by actors. How does this change what's on the page?

A: Collaboration can be a tremendously empowering and creative thing. I'll never forget the very first time I sat in on a read-through of one of my scripts. It had before that been my baby and suddenly we had professional actors who were excited about the project and had thought a lot about their characters. . .when they were reading, the words just exploded off the page. Only then did I realize how powerful what I wrote could be.

2-1 NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

A typical narrative film follows a character or characters through a chain of events that has a beginning, middle, and end. Film theorists who focus on narrative structure make a useful distinction between the full set of events that we piece together as viewers (the **story**) and the events that are presented in the film (the **plot**). The plot, then, is a particular selection and arrangement of events from the full story. The challenge for the screenwriter and for the filmmakers is not only to invent a compelling and coherent story but also to decide how to structure that story for audiences. In this section, we will consider some of the strategies that filmmakers employ and develop a vocabulary for talking about narrative structure.

Though we won't focus on nonnarrative films until chapter 8 (in the experimental film section), it is worth noting here that not all films are organized around story and plot. Nonnarrative films are instead structured around, for example, visual or aural motifs, abstract forms, and patterns. The images and sounds in these films tend to be more metaphorical or allusive. Many of these films are fundamentally disorderly, “organizing” images and sounds to match the illogic of dreams or altered states of consciousness.

2-1a Plot and Story Order

The narrative of Billy Wilder's 1950 Hollywood melodrama *Sunset Boulevard* illustrates the distinction between **plot order**, the sequence of events adopted in the telling of the tale, and **story order**, the chronological sequence of narrative events. The film begins with the aftermath of a murder as we see an unidentified man floating face down in a swimming pool (fig. 2.1). One hundred minutes later, immediately preceding the film's final scene, we find ourselves at the same swimming pool looking at the same dead body (fig. 2.2). The film story is about a down-on-his-luck screenwriter and his relationship with a former silent screen star. The story has an arc, a trajectory from their first encounter to his eventual seduction to his death face down in the pool. But unlike the linear story order, the plot order is evocatively circular. The impact of the cautionary tale the film tells is held not, or not only, in its basic story line but also in its telling. The circular shape to the plot (end, beginning, middle, and end) renders the hero's fate inevitable. The rest of the film is an explanation;



2.1 and 2.2 Two sequential story events in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) are shown in the beginning and ending of the plot. The rest of the film serves mostly to explain how he and we got here and why.

it shows us *how* yet another Hollywood dreamer has been corrupted by the Hollywood dream.

This same basic plot structure—end, beginning, middle, end—is used to a different effect in the French melodrama *Leaving* (Catherine Corsini, 2009). The film opens with a middle-aged couple in bed; she is

plot Story events presented on screen.

plot order The sequence of events adopted in the telling of a story.

story order The chronological sequence of narrative events.

awake, he is asleep, snoring. She gets up and exits the room. And then we hear a gunshot; though we don't see the grisly act itself, we gather she has killed herself. A simple title follows, setting the story some months earlier. The title keys a **flashback**, a scene or in this case a sequence of scenes that recapitulate the past (in the world of the film's story).

This flashback structure is common in film storytelling, and as filmmakers we instinctively recognize its function. We assume as we watch *Leaving* that the flashback will explain what has driven this woman to this act. When, some 80 minutes later, we find ourselves in that same bedroom on that same morning, we know better why she is upset; her affair has ended and she has reluctantly returned to her husband, the man sleeping beside her. But as we see this scene for the second time, we discover that she does not shoot herself but instead she shoots him. Despite a plot order that begins with the ending, we are still surprised when we see the ending a second time.

Flash-forward, a shot or scene or sequence of scenes that projects future events in the world of the film's story, is not nearly as common as flashback. There are basic, logical reasons for this. The storyteller knows the past, but how can he or she know the future? And while flashbacks can suggest such commonplace activities as reflection and remembrance, flash-forwards suggest paranormal prescience. Most often flash-forwards are less a mode of storytelling than a momentary interruption in the logical flow of the narrative, as in *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) when we get a glimpse at the bloody climax (a shot of the apparent aftermath of a motorcycle accident) before it happens “live” on screen.

A plot that scrambles or withholds story events can engage us in trying to piece together the story order and make sense of its logic. Marc Webb's *500 Days of Summer* (2009) plays provocatively with sequencing, telling its story with vignettes taken from seemingly random days in a 500-day romance. The plot order may seem arbitrary (it begins with day 488 and moves back and



2.3 When Tom and Summer reconnect after breaking up, we are shown two versions of events: one reflecting his expectation that they will get back together and the other reflecting the reality that she just wants to be friends. *500 Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009).

forth from there), and it certainly does not match the story order (which starts with day 1 and ends with day 500). The point the film makes is that the breakup was not a simple matter of cause and effect, or the fallout from some single significant argument, but was instead the consequence of a number of little things. When the romance just sort of fizzles out, we (along with the male protagonist, Tom) are left with the task of figuring out why. This task involves finding clues by revisiting memories of better days (fig. 2.3).

Story order and plot order can be—and often are—the same, since chronological order is a traditional way to structure a screenplay. When story order and plot order differ, it is useful to think about why the filmmakers chose to plot the events as they did and how that structure relates to meaning.

2-1b Stories in Three Acts

Lecturers at screenwriting seminars inevitably tout the three-act structure as a way to build a narrative arc. And most screenwriting software follows suit. The three-act structure plays out as follows: In act 1 expectations are raised. In act 2 expectations are confounded. And in the final act expectations are resolved (required, dismissed, found to be silly), ideally in a mildly surprising fashion. Though we may resist thinking about creative work as the product of such a simple formula, it is interesting to see how many films fit this pattern and how well this pattern facilitates the telling of a story.

The three-act structure is evident in the frothy contemporary romantic comedy *My Best Friend's Wedding*. Act 1 establishes the relationships among the principal characters and elaborates their expectations

flashback A scene that interrupts the chronological flow of story events by referring to an earlier time.

flash-forward A scene that interrupts the chronological flow of story events by skipping ahead to a later time.

for the future. It is composed primarily of **exposition**, the presentation of narrative information that provides context for the story and plot, including character development and the establishment of setting and/or location. Through the story's exposition, we discover that food critic Julianne and her best friend Michael, a sports reporter, have made a deal: if neither has found a suitable mate by the time they both reach 28, they will marry each other. The plan may have been a lark at first, but for Julianne at 28 it offers the promise of marriage to a man she actually likes. Her only other significant relationship with a man at this time is with George; he is likeable but, inconvenient for her, gay. The big date is about to arrive, and Julianne is anxious to cash in the wager, but Michael upsets her plan. He calls to say he's fallen in love with Kim, a woman he's met in Chicago. He has proposed and she has accepted. Act 1 ends and act 2 is cued succinctly by Julianne: "I've got exactly four days to break up a wedding, steal the bride's fella, and I haven't a clue how to do it" (fig. 2.4).

With the advent of act 2 "complications ensue": Julianne's various attempts to embarrass the bride-to-be fail, in large part because Kim is sweet, smart, and tough (fig. 2.5). Making matters worse, Michael really is in love with Kim. Steven Spielberg has famously said that the key to all love stories is "the obstacle," what prevents the couple from simply getting on with their lives together. Here the film plays with this formulaic element: Kim is the obstacle for Julianne and Michael, or so the film seems to suggest at the start of act 2. But as act 2 plays out, we discover that it is Julianne who is the obstacle to the true love match of Kim and Michael, a mild surprise that composes much of act 3. Indeed, act 3 is cued by a climactic showdown in a ballpark women's bathroom (fig. 2.5) as Kim finally abandons "being nice" and decides to fight for her man. As in many three-act films, the climax marks a turning point in the narrative.

The final act is composed of the wedding itself—a celebration of the right couple getting hitched—and it is the film's mild surprise that the standard romantic



2.4 "I've got exactly four days to break up a wedding, steal the bride's fella, and I haven't a clue how to do it." Her expectations confounded, Julianne is poised to set the events of act 2 in motion. *My Best Friend's Wedding* (P. J. Hogan, 1997).



2.5 A complication Julianne hadn't considered punctuates act 2: she discovers that Kim is tougher than she looks.

comedy narrative is upset and in the end Michael rejects Julianne for Kim (fig. 2.6). (The standard romantic comedy formula would have Michael finally reject Kim, who would be revealed to be dependable but no fun, for Julianne, who is a pain in the neck but lots of fun.) In the film's final moments, Michael's apparent happiness with Kim actually makes Julianne happy, which surprises Julianne as much as it surprises us.

Writers often discuss the importance of characters changing in this final stage or act of the drama. Though *My Best Friend's Wedding* seems slight and sweet, its third act carries a significant message: Julianne does not get what she (thinks she) wants, but in the end she's a better person for it. She learns a thing or two about love even though, for the moment, she hasn't found it for

exposition The presentation of narrative information that provides context for the story and plot, including character development and the establishment of setting and/or location.



2.6 We are mildly surprised when act 3 ends with Michael and Kim's happy wedding.

herself. The film's life lesson is that even thwarted desire has its rewards, a lesson contained in the mild surprise of the third act.

Closure—the final resolution of the various narrative threads and the various questions or problems posed by the story's conflicts—can be neat or untidy; closure can be the consequence of a logical progression of events or the result of some magical, fateful occurrence. In David Lean's 1945 melodrama *Brief Encounter*, for example, the *narrative fix*—a term used to describe the conflicts set in motion in the story—concerns the relationship between a doctor (Alec) and a housewife (Laura), both married to other people. They meet by chance at a railway station café, talk, meet again, and fall in love. Both still care for their spouses, but the prospect of being together is difficult to resist. This desire leads to a rendezvous at Alec's friend's apartment where an affair seems sure to begin. But just as they are about to give in to their desire, the friend arrives unexpectedly and the opportunity is lost.

Closure is complicated here: Alec and Laura are, after all, proper married people, and what they have planned to do is deeply problematic. Two things we know for sure: they're in love, and they can't be trusted to resist temptation on their own. So fate intervenes, twice. Out of the blue, Alec tells Laura that he has been offered a post in South Africa and has decided to leave England, in part to keep from acting on his desire to be with her. This seeming "hand of fate" imposing

closure on the film is called a *deus ex machina* (roughly "God from the machine"), the introduction of a contrived event to solve the problems set in motion in the story.

All that is left for them, then, is one last moment together in the railway café. But they are denied that as well, as a second fateful occurrence interrupts their final brief encounter; one of the woman's chatty friends arrives and sits down at their table. The friend blathers on even as the doctor says good-bye, lightly touches Laura's shoulder, and exits

to catch his train. To the friend's bewilderment, Laura follows him out onto the platform (fig. 2.7). As Alec's train whizzes by, for a moment we are led to believe that Laura might hurl herself onto the tracks. But she doesn't. She returns home to an uncertain reunion with her husband. The film may well end affirming the sanctity of marriage—"You've been a long way away," the husband remarks in the last scene, as if he knows what's she's been up to, "Thank you for coming back to me"—but it also makes clear that "true love" will never be realized. Moreover, though the final scene ends with Laura embracing her husband, whatever she still feels for Alec is unresolved. Closure need not tie up every loose end in the story; life simply goes on.



2.7 Alec and Laura are forlorn; their chance at an affair is now forever lost. Narrative closure in *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) is untidy; they return to their spouses but we fear—we know—that true love and happiness have eluded them both forever.

closure The resolution of narrative questions and/or problems.

deus ex machina The introduction of a contrived event to solve the problems set in motion in the story.

2-1c The Hero's Journey

The three-act formula roughly matches the hero narrative proposed by the religion and mythology scholar Joseph Campbell. This paradigm, which has roots in Greek mythology, involves a lone male hero who must endure or fight to achieve his goal. His story has three stages: (1) the hero ventures forth, (2) he faces a trial of sorts (a series of obstacles he must overcome, a series of fights he must win), and (3) in the end he returns home smarter (though not necessarily better off materially) than he was when the story began.

Clint Eastwood's western *Unforgiven* (1992) illustrates the hero's journey (figs. 2.8–2.10). The film begins as William Munny, a retired gunfighter, is unsuccessfully and unsatisfyingly working his small farm. His wife dies, leaving him to take care of their children, another job he's unsuited for.

The first stage of Munny's journey begins when the town prostitutes offer him the job of avenging an attack on one of their co-workers; he straps on his guns and ventures forth. In stage 2, the trial or combat, he faces a series of challenges, climaxing with a gunfight against the vicious and corrupt town sheriff, the inaptly named Little Bill.

After dispatching Bill, and in doing so establishing justice for everyone in the town of Big Whiskey, Wyoming, Munny hangs up his guns and returns to the domestic life he abandoned at the start of the film. He is now wiser for having lived through the trial. A final title card tells us of his move to San Francisco with his children and that he is happy now earning a living in the dry goods business.

The hero's search is often for an answer to a single pressing question: Who am I? Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* is the classic example of this quest narrative, cast as a tragedy: the play's "hero" searches for his true identity only to discover that he has killed his father and married



2.8 The retired gunfighter William Munny covered in mud after tending to the hogs, most of which, we learn, "have the fever." *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992).



2.9 Tired and beat-up (note the gashes under both eyes), Munny endures the trial stage of the narrative.

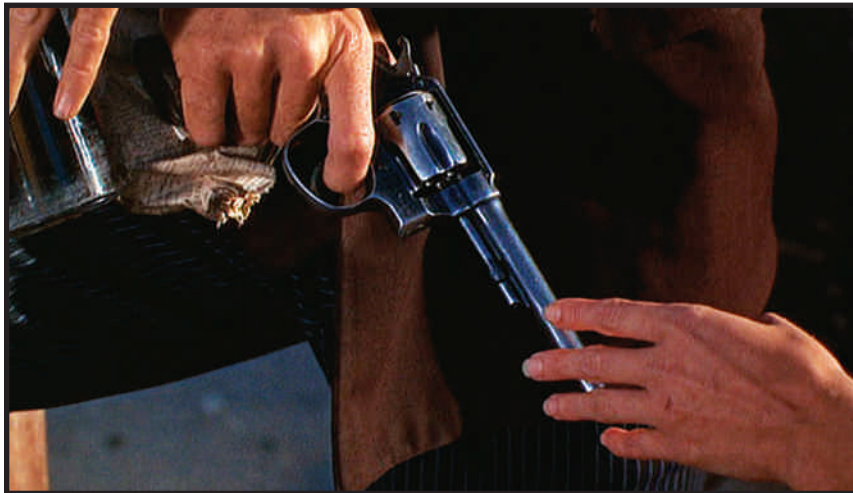


2.10 Having vanquished Little Bill and rid Little Whiskey of its villains, Munny returns to the farm as the sun finally sets on his career as a gunfighter.

his mother. Though the specific content may not apply, we can see a variation of this "Who am I?" formula at play in a number of Hollywood films, including the *Star Wars* series (George Lucas, 1977–1983). With the universe in the balance, the serialized conflict between



2.11 Bonnie spies Clyde stealing her mother's car. Rather than call the police, she quickly gets dressed and joins him. *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967).



2.12 Bonnie admires Clyde's gun. The gesture links the A and B narratives.

the Empire and the rebels and the rivalry between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader chronicled in episodes 4 through 6 is finally resolved only when Luke answers the question, "Who am I?" and comes to grips with his true identity, that he is Vader's son.

Lucas was well aware of Campbell's work when he introduced the *Star Wars* series in 1977. The film is set in a galaxy far, far away, but the story is at once accessible and familiar. We are meant to recognize these basic formulas as an entrée into the otherwise unfamiliar,

A and B stories (also, kernel and satellite stories) A narrative formula that prioritizes one of the narratives while simultaneously tracking a second narrative.

fantasy world of the film. Indeed Lucas's goal here is to use this simple narrative framework to universalize the drama in this timeworn story.

2-1d A and B Stories

Many film narratives employ a dual structure: what screenwriters call **A and B stories**, or **kernel and satellite stories**. This formula prioritizes one of the narratives, the A (principal or kernel) story, but simultaneously tracks a second narrative, the B (secondary or satellite) story. The implicit promise inherent to this structure is that the A and B narratives will somehow intersect or at least their resolutions will complement each other.

Arthur Penn's 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde* offers a good example of this storytelling structure. The film opens with Bonnie alone and undressed in her bedroom. She is tired of her life as a waitress in her dusty little town and she is ready for adventure, ready for someone to come along and take her away from this life. Opportunity knocks in the person of the escaped convict Clyde Barrow, whom she spies out her window as he is stealing her mother's car (fig. 2.11). Rather than turn him in, Bonnie joins Clyde in the stolen car and the two embark on a crime spree.

Two narratives are set in motion in this opening scene: (A) the crime-spree story and (B) the story attending the fraught sexual relationship between the two outlaws. As they ponder running off together in her mother's car (the A story), Bonnie admires Clyde's pistol and goads him flirtatiously, "Bet you wouldn't have the gumption to use it" (the B story). The double entendre is thick here; we know that she's not only talking about shooting a gun (fig. 2.12). Clyde is remarkably clueless: He shows her he's adept with the pistol (in the A story), but after they rob a local store and stop for their first real tryst, we discover why Clyde was so slow to follow Bonnie's prompt regarding sex (in the B story). Clyde is not, as he puts it, "much of a lover boy." The rest of the film tracks both narratives. The crime spree is followed in some detail,



2.13 Bonnie discovers that Clyde “ain’t much of a lover boy.”



2.14 The bloody climax of *Bonnie and Clyde*. In the end, the A story takes precedence, and the joy the outlaws find in the B story is short lived.

and it is, in that they get away with the robberies, a story of a series of triumphs. The B story for most of the film offers significantly less evidence of success as it chronicles Clyde’s continued troubles in bed (fig. 2.13).

At the two-thirds mark of the plot, after a series of capers, Bonnie and Clyde stop to reflect on their handiwork. Bonnie begins thinking about the future, about going straight, about retiring after one last score. We have seen enough crime films to recognize the meaning of this moment in the A story: such reflection seems a sure sign they’re about to get caught. It is at this very moment in the A narrative that Clyde finally succeeds in the B narrative.

We find the lovers post-tryst. “Do you feel like you’re supposed to feel?” he asks. “You did perfect,” she replies. “I guess I did,” he beams. As things play out, this moment of bliss in the B story proves fleeting as the A

story takes precedence again and the legendary outlaws are gunned down by the FBI (fig. 2.14).

2-1e Parallel Stories

Some films have multiple narratives and, unlike the A and B narrative formula, deliberately do not prioritize the stories. Instead the point of this structure is to highlight parallel action, to track several stories simultaneously and then show how these seemingly unrelated stories somehow connect. A good example of such a film is Steven Soderbergh’s *Traffic* (2000), which follows three distinct narratives: the story of two Mexican detectives negotiating the treacherous world of gang-controlled drug running; the story of two American detectives who arrest a drug kingpin (who is set up by his cohorts) and then watch as the kingpin’s wife takes over the business; and the story of an ambitious, politically conservative judge committed to the party line on fighting the so-called drug war until his daughter falls into drug addiction and teaches him that the war on drugs may well be unwinnable (figs. 2.15–2.17).

By the end of the film we discover that these three stories overlap: the corruption of law and order

in Mexico and the drug cartels there and elsewhere in Latin America are the source for the drugs peddled by the organization headed by the American-based drug trafficker (and then his wife) and used by the daughter of the judge. What Soderbergh shows by tracking these three narratives simultaneously is what the judge finally understands at the end of the film: the war on drugs is a complicated, global phenomenon involving peasant farmers, organized gangsters, cops, and finally teenage girls—very different players in simultaneous narratives that depend on each other in complex ways.

The striking experiment *Timecode* (2000) uses a different system to track multiple narratives. The director Mike Figgis shows four simultaneous stories unraveling in four separate “windows” on screen (fig. 2.18). The effect is at once visually arresting and a testament to our ability as contemporary filmgoers to pay attention



to more than one set of images and more than one story at once.

2-1f Narrative Time

As discussed the introduction to this section, there is a distinction between *story* (the full set of events that we piece together as viewers) and *plot* (the on-screen events). That distinction is especially useful when we analyze how the story is told, which moments from the story the filmmakers have selected for inclusion in the film, in what order they occur as the film unfolds, and finally how much time it takes for the filmmakers to reveal these moments on screen.

The term **story duration** refers to the elapsed time from the first to the final events of the narrative. While it is possible for story and plot to cover the same time span, typically **plot duration** involves a shorter span of time than story duration. The plot of *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011), for example, covers a short period in Mavis Gary's life at age 37, while the story extends further back in time to Mavis's high school years. A third distinction, **screen duration**, refers to the running time of the film. During the 93 minutes from the opening sequence to the credits, we see selected moments from the weeks covered by the plot.

The distinction between story duration and plot duration is made clear by what the filmmakers choose to tell in full and what they choose to summarize or ignore. For example, the past that characters bring with them into a film, what screenwriters call **backstory**, is part of the story duration but may not take up much time in the plot. In *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), the detective Sam Spade's shady past is mentioned but never shown. Though little time in the plot is spent on the topic, it is nonetheless important to a full understanding of the story; it provides Spade's



2.15–2.17 The parallel narratives in Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000). Soderbergh helps us distinguish the narratives by color-coding them: The story set in Mexico is shot in an orange-brown tint. The story of American police in pursuit of the American-based drug lord is cast in yellows and greens. The judge and his daughter's story is captured in blues.



2.18 Four related narratives play out in four distinct “windows” within the frame. *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, 2000).



2.19 and 2.20 An innocent toast and its not so innocent aftermath. The abrupt transition signals that all is not well in Todd Phillips’s *The Hangover* (2009).

complex motivation for solving the case of his murdered partner.

Filmmakers are constantly battling against the constraints of the typical 90- to 120-minute running time of a feature film and employ strategies of compression, in which scenes are stripped to their essentials and/or summarized by familiar “codes.” A related maxim of screenwriting is “arrive late; leave early.” Note how often in films we enter a scene (a conversation, a scuffle, a sexual act) after it has begun and how often we exit the scene before said action has completely played out. As filmgoers, we fill in the beginning and end.

Strategic use of **ellipses** (the on-screen omission of story events, as described above) allows films to cover vast amounts of story time—a life from birth to death in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (David Fincher, 2008), for example. Days, weeks, months, even years can be dispatched with a single cut from a character looking young to looking old (or the reverse, as in *Benjamin Button*).

Ellipses can also represent a gap in a character’s memory or knowledge, as in *The Hangover*. Early in the story, four young men stand on the roof of a hotel and raise a toast (fig. 2.19). The subsequent scene is of the morning after, as the characters realize in dramatic fashion the promise of the film’s title (fig. 2.20). Finding out

story duration The time span encompassing all of the story events.

plot duration The time span encompassing only those story events that are selected for the plot.

screen duration The running time of the film.

backstory The past that characters bring with them into a film.

ellipses The omission of significant chunks of story time in the on-screen plot.

what happened between the two scenes drives the narrative; this missing piece of story time holds the answer to a missing friend's whereabouts.

When filmmakers want to quickly cue the audience to the passage of time, they may use **intertitles** such as “later that day” and “five years later.” Intertitles are examples of **nondiegetic** material (figs. 2.21–2.23). The term is used by film scholars to denote material derived from outside the story world; the Greek word *diegesis* refers to the fictional world in which narrative events occur. (These terms will be revisited in more detail in chapter 6 on sound.)

Timecode, which we looked at as an experiment in parallel narratives (fig. 2.18), also offers a rare example of a film that unfolds in real time; the plot duration corresponds to the screen duration. All four stories were shot simultaneously; four cameras in four locations began rolling and stopped at exactly the same time, without cuts. The 1952 western *High Noon* is the classic example of a film that takes place in real time, as the film tracks the inexorable lead-up to a climactic gunfight (fig. 2.24).

More often plot time and screen time are matched only in specific scenes to heighten suspense or to set up a sudden jolt of violence. In the opening sequence of



2.21–2.23 At the end of the comedy *Chasing Amy* (1997), writer-director Kevin Smith uses an intertitle to quickly signal the shift from the main characters' breakup to a brief and bittersweet reunion a year later.

intertitle A piece of text inserted into the film to cue the audience to the passage of time. Intertitles might also provide dialogue (in silent films), prologue, or epilogue copy.

nondiegetic A term used to denote material within a film that comes from outside the world of the story.

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*, for example, we follow the main character Theo through the routine of an ordinary morning. He buys a cup of coffee, stops to add a little booze to the drink, and then, just as he is about to continue, a bomb detonates nearby (figs. 2.25–2.27). What makes this scene work is the “day-in-a-life” feel created as events unfold in real time. We watch the scene much as we would watch the same actions play out in our everyday lives.

2.24 Plot time and screen time are synchronized as we wait with our hero, Will Kane (foreground), for the inevitable gunfight in *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952).



2.25–2.27 The opening sequence from Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) unfolds in real time so that the sudden detonation of a bomb delivers a jolt to the audience.

2-2 CHARACTERS

Characters are a key to our emotional and intellectual investment in the story. Because of our identification with and idealization of movie characters, we follow story events with keen interest. As we endeavor to more complexly analyze the narrative function of these movie characters, we need to begin to recognize in the stories

we see on screen fundamental character types and begin to appreciate and understand how dialogue and narration are used to reveal character traits, motivations, and points of view. Also of import here is the effect movie stars have on how we appreciate and understand the movie characters they portray.

2-2a Character Motivation

Characters are fundamentally the sum total of external, physical, observable details—appearance, gestures, dialogue, and actions. It is from our observation of such superficial and partial information that we begin to

figure out who they are and why they do what they do in the film's story. The key to a deeper understanding of film characters is to apprehend their motivation, the proximate cause or explanation for their behavior. This focus on motivation importantly repeats a process already undertaken by the actors cast to play

these characters, as they too try to situate the character (via his or her quirks, behavior, and participation in the story at hand) with regard to fundamental desires and dreams.

In *Let the Right One In*, character motivation is essential to our appreciation and understanding of the film. All of the characters want something, and when we figure out what that is, we understand who these people are and where they are headed in the world of the film.

We are first introduced to Oskar, a preadolescent boy, as he playacts at threatening someone with a real knife. Who is this strange child, we ask ourselves, and what is he planning? We then meet Håkan, an older man who has moved into Oskar's apartment building. We see him coolly murder a man, then drain and collect his blood (fig. 2.28). And we wonder, why is he doing this? Finally, there is Eli, the androgynous teenager in what appears to be Håkan's care (fig. 2.29). We get only a glimpse of her at first. But even at first glance, she is at once fascinating and unusual.

The motivations for these characters become clear as the film unspools. Oskar is brutally bullied at school and dreams of (but initially is too afraid to seek) revenge (fig. 2.30). Håkan, we discover, kills at Eli's behest. Though he is an old man, there are hints at his deep affection for Eli that seem not exactly parental. Eli is a vampire. Her basic motivation is simple—she needs blood to live. And she needs Håkan to get it for her, if only to keep her from desperate acts of violence on the streets. Her



2.28 Håkan kills a man and then drains his blood. But why? *Let the Right One In* (*Låt der rätte komma in*, Tomas Alfredson, 2008).



2.29 Eli has simple motivations: she needs blood and shelter from the daylight to survive.

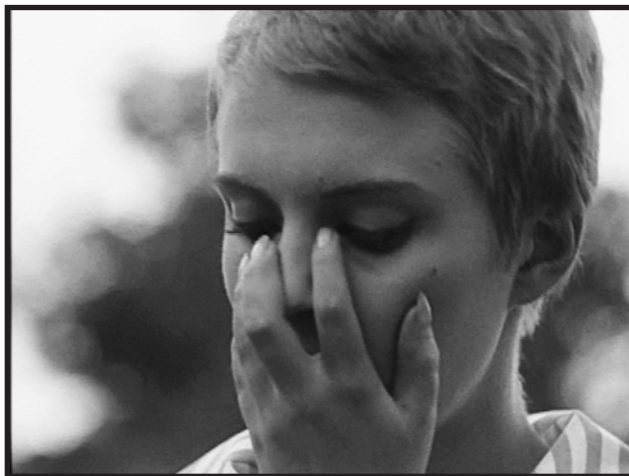


2.30 Oskar is tormented at school. His relationship with Eli gives him power against the bullies.



2.31 The final scene shows Oskar tapping k-i-s-s in Morse code on a box containing and concealing Eli as he escapes with her. Here he embarks on the road Håkan has previously traveled.

“attraction” to Oskar is more complex; at first she recognizes his loneliness and isolation—she too is lonely and isolated—but such a recognition may be less a matter of friendship or love than an aspect of her predatory nature.



The plot chronicles Håkan’s exit from Eli’s life and his replacement by Oskar. We know why Oskar leaves with Eli: she’s his ticket out of town and away from awful parents and classmates. But we wonder all the way through the film’s final scene whether Eli really cares for Oskar or simply needs him, much as she once needed Håkan (fig. 2.31). How we read Eli’s motivation very much governs how we read the film; it is either an odd little love story or the tale of a monster and her pitiable and willing victim.

Our expectations regarding character motivation are made especially clear when they are deliberately subverted, as in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1960 film *Breathless*. Patricia, the American student abroad who falls into a romantic entanglement with a French gangster, seems to act only on impulse. When she calls the police and turns in her lover Michel, we have no idea why. In the end as Michel lies dying in the street, Patricia first appears dismayed (fig. 2.32), then almost immediately afterward she holds her head in her hand and looks down at the ground as if she doesn’t quite understand what has happened and why (fig. 2.33), even though it was *her* phone call that helped the police trap him. Her final gesture is a look back at the camera (fig. 2.34) that seems to suggest



2.32–2.34 After her lover dies in the street, Patricia looks dismayed and then somewhat confused, then a bit bored. When she looks directly at the camera, it denies us any indication as to her motivation. *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1960).



2.35 Chief Brody, the outsider, is new to Amity Island and afraid of the water. He is the least likely of the three men to kill the shark. *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975).



2.36 Hooper, the nature-loving scientist.



2.37 Quint, the iconoclast seaman, has a singular desire to kill the shark. His character has parallels to Captain Ahab in the novel *Moby Dick*, including a shared fate.

that she is looking to us, the filmgoers, for a clue. It's if she does not know how or what to feel. Therefore we do not read the scene *with* her, but rather consider the narrative events despite her, in the absence of the cause-and-effect structure implied when we view action as a consequence of character motivation.

2-2b Character Types

As we will see in the section on genre later in this chapter, film narratives often adhere to established formulas. If we are watching a western, for example, we recognize the hero instinctively, just as we recognize his adversary. Their different motivations (e.g., to save the town, to rob a bank) and attitudes (e.g., to protect and serve, to satisfy a desire for more money, sex, or power at any cost) give the narrative shape and coherence. If a film is about good versus evil, it helps if characters clearly embody these characteristics.

Character types need not be so sharply opposed in order to generate dramatic tension. In Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, three men are put aboard the same boat with the same assignment: find and kill the shark before it ruins the summer season in Amity, a resort town. Drama ensues as the three men clash in conflicts made inevitable by their fundamental character differences (figs. 2.35–2.37). That these characters fit certain familiar types does not cheapen the story; indeed, wondering how these men work together holds our interest and sustains the suspense of the film.

Recognizable character types have been an essential aspect of film narrative since the advent of cinema. Absent the clues to character that spoken dialogue can offer, “stock characters” made the prospect of following silent movies easier. For example, audiences attending a screening of D. W. Griffith's silent melodrama

Way Down East in its initial release in 1920 no doubt recognized the drama's three leads as familiar types: the country innocent Anna Moore who ventures to the city (fig. 2.38), the womanizing city slicker Lennox Sanderson who leaves her pregnant (fig. 2.39), and the good-hearted farmer's son David Bartlett who saves



2.38 Anna, the girl from the country. *Way Down East* (D. W. Griffith, 1920).



2.40 David, the good-hearted country-boy hero.



2.39 Lennox Sanderson, the womanizer.



2.41 Griffith satirizes progressive women by portraying Anna's suffragette aunt as a silly eccentric.

the day (fig. 2.40). The film is populated by secondary characters who also fit into types: the nutty professor, the vile busybody, and the silly suffragette.

Each of these character types in *Way Down East* contributes to the film's larger implications as a social commentary. First, there is the treatise on the Christian virtue of forgiveness, a key theme of many silent film melodramas. Anna is seduced and despoiled by Lennox, but the reasons for her predicament impress none of the older, righteously old-school characters. We first meet a local preacher who refuses to baptize Anna's child, then the boardinghouse proprietor who tosses her out on the street because she had a baby but no husband, and finally David's father who quotes scripture as he too fails to act with compassion and kicks her out into a raging storm. David, the farmer's son, goes against his father's wishes, assails Lennox, and proclaims his love

for Anna. In the end it is hard to miss the Christian parable in play: it is the son's love and understanding that sways the rest of the characters.

The use of character types to fill in the lesser roles in the drama allows Griffith to comment upon the perils of modernity, another familiar theme. Anna's suffragette aunt may have a big heart, but she is depicted as an eccentric (she wears men's clothing, for example)—no doubt Griffith's comment on what he saw as the comical notion of women seeking the same rights as men (fig. 2.41).

2-2c Dialogue and Narration

With the advent of "talkies," filmmakers gained another tool for revealing characters' personalities, motivations, and perspectives on the action in the film.

Dialogue—what the characters say within the world of the story—and narration—commentary from outside the story (and therefore nondiegetic)—offer these kinds of insights. Both are written into the script and delivered by actors, whose “reading” of the lines affects their meaning. We will explore dialogue and narration in greater depth in chapter 6 on sound, but here we will focus on their connection to character.

The example that follows is from the script for *Fargo* (1996), written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. The script excerpt includes some notes on setting and action, but it consists primarily of dialogue. The details of what the bar looks like, what songs are playing, and how the men appear and say their lines are left for the director, designers, and actors to realize. It is an adage of screenwriting that there is no inner life in a script, but note how well the Coen brothers communicate through dialogue and gesture what’s going on in the characters’ heads without ever resorting to internal monologue.

Fargo tells the story of a car salesman named Jerry who plots and then stages the kidnapping of his wife in order to extort ransom money from his wealthy father-in-law, money he needs to cover up his embezzlement of dealership funds. The scene in question stages his first meeting with Carl and Gaear, the men Jerry will hire to kidnap his wife.

INT. CHAIN RESTAURANT - NIGHT

The bar is downscale even for this town.
Country music plays on the jukebox.

Two men are seated in a booth at the back. One is short, slight, youngish. The other man is somewhat older, and dour. The table in front of them is littered with empty long-neck beer bottles. The ashtray is full.

Jerry approaches.

JERRY
I’m, uh, Jerry Lundegaard -

CARL
You’re Jerry Lundegaard?

JERRY
Yah, Shep Proudfoot said -

CARL
Shep said you’d be here at 7:30.
What gives, man?

JERRY
Shep said 8:30.

CARL
We been sitting here an hour.
I’ve peed three times already.

JERRY
I’m sure sorry. I - Shep told me 8:30.
It was a mix-up, I guess.

CARL
Ya got the car?

JERRY
Yah, you bet. It’s in the lot there.
Brand-new burnt umber Ciera.

CARL
Yeah, okay. Well, siddown then.
I’m Carl Showalter and this is my
associate Gaear Grimsrud.

JERRY
Yah, how ya doin’. So, uh, we all
set on this thing, then?

CARL
Sure, Jerry, we’re all set. Why
wouldn’t we be?

JERRY
Yah, no, I’m sure you are. Shep
vouched for you and all. I got
every confidence in you fellas.

They stare at him. An awkward beat.

JERRY
... So I guess that’s it, then.
Here’s the keys -

CARL
No, that’s not it, Jerry.

JERRY
Huh?

CARL
The new vehicle, plus forty
thousand dollars.

JERRY
Yah, but the deal was, the car
first, see, then the forty
thousand, like as if it was the
ransom. I thought Shep told you -

CARL
Shep didn't tell us much, Jerry.

JERRY
Well, okay, it's -

CARL
Except that you were gonna be
here at 7:30.

JERRY
Yah, well, that was a mix-up, then.

CARL
Yeah, you already said that.

JERRY
Yah. But it's not a whole pay-
in-advance deal. I give you a
brand-new vehicle in advance and -

CARL
I'm not gonna debate you, Jerry.

JERRY
Okay.

CARL
I'm not gonna sit here and debate.
I will say this though: what Shep
told us didn't make a whole lot of sense.

JERRY
Oh, no, it's real sound. It's
all worked out.

CARL
You want your own wife kidnapped?

JERRY
Yah.

Carl stares. Jerry looks blankly back.

CARL
... You - my point is, you pay
the ransom - what eighty thousand
bucks? - I mean, you give us

half the ransom, forty thousand,
you keep half. It's like robbing
Peter to play Paul, it doesn't
make any -

JERRY
Okay, it's - see, it's not me
payin' the ransom. The thing is,
my wife, she's wealthy - her dad,
he's real well off. Now, I'm in
a bit of trouble -

CARL
What kind of trouble are you in, Jerry?

JERRY
Well, that's, that's, I'm not gonna go
inta, inta - see, I just need
money. Now, her dad's real wealthy -

CARL
So why don't you just ask him
for the money?

FARGO, Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Published by
Faber & Faber (London), 1996.

The scene is fairly simple: three people in a room with something (money) they all want or need. They don't trust each other: Carl is oddly peeved about Jerry's late arrival and then overreacts to Jerry's simple query: "... we all set on this thing, then?" Gaear's silence is offered in counterpoint to Jerry and Carl's chatter; he is frightening in part because he doesn't speak. His lack of bluster implies impending action, that he might act without bothering to say anything first.

At a key moment in the scene Carl is bewildered and asks Jerry, "You want your own wife kidnapped?" "Yah," Jerry replies simply. The matter-of-fact dialogue is offered on the one hand to establish the intellectual level of the characters and on the other to allow us to focus on a telling exchange of gestures elaborated in the simple stage direction: "Carl stares. Jerry looks blankly back." Throughout Jerry is revealed to be a bumbling weakling; indeed his repeated apologies (for being late, for being misunderstood, for needing the money) do little to instill confidence in his adopted role as criminal mastermind. He may have "every confidence in" Carl and Gaear, but they (and we) have little reason to have confidence in him.

When Carl states the obvious, that Jerry's plan "doesn't make any sense," Jerry replies by stammering about his rich father-in-law, then remarking: "I'm in a bit of trouble." When Carl asks, "What kind of trouble are you in?" he speaks for us; that is, he states what we

are wondering as well. Jerry continues to stammer: “I’m not gonna go into,” then repeating “Now, her dad’s real wealthy.” Again Carl asks the question that is likely on our minds, “So why don’t you just ask him for the money?” We are hooked into watching more to find out about the problem between Jerry and his father-in-law, a problem that has put Jerry in a plot with the likes of Carl and Gaele. It is a simple scene with decidedly simple dialogue. But it sets the parameters of a narrative that is anything but simple.

There is little physical action in the scene. Jerry enters the restaurant, finds Carl and Gaele, sits, and then has a brief and unsatisfying conversation with them. But a lot happens. The key to this scene as written is a dramatic predicament elaborated in fairly banal dialogue, dialogue that suggests conflicts (between Jerry and his father-in-law, between Jerry and his wife, between Jerry and two criminals who think he’s an idiot) and reveals personalities that will be the key to our appreciation and understanding of the film. We know a lot more when we leave this restaurant than when we entered it, and, more important, we want to know more.

Fargo unfolds without voice-over narration; the insights we gain into the characters come from listening to and observing them, as is the case with most films. Some films have a **narrator**, a person who sets up the story and comments on the action. As in literature, if that person is a participant in the story (signaled by “I”), then his or her commentary is known as **first-person narration**. **Third-person narrators** are unseen observers and not characters in the story. We will look at different types of narration in the “Voice Track” section of chapter 6 on sound.

A related issue has to do with the larger question of point of view in film and whether a film (not just the narration) can be told in the first person. Some film theorists argue that all cinema is told in the third person; they view the camera as a narrator and contend that the camera is never actually or literally “I.” Most film professors opt for a more fluid notion of cinematic narration—that it is possible for all or part of a story to be limited to the experiences and awareness of one person.

narrator A person who sets up the story and comments on the action.

first-person narration Commentary on the film’s action by a character who speaks as “I.”

third-person narration Commentary on the film’s action by someone who is not a character in the story and who refers to all of the characters as *he*, *she*, or *they*.

2-2d Movie Stars and Screen Characters

Unlike the characters in literary works, screen characters are “embodied”; that is, we do not imagine what they look like from a description, but rather they come to us in visible, tangible form. We don’t watch scripts, after all, we watch movies. In the next chapter, we will examine how actors are dressed and styled to look like the characters they play and how they create their characters through performance; here we consider how a star’s persona merges with the character.

The script for the 1959 film *Some Like It Hot* includes the character of Sugar Kane, a lonely band singer with lousy luck at love. Watching Marilyn Monroe play Sugar Kane at once simplifies matters (she gives the role a physical form and she gives the character a recognizable voice) and complicates them (fig. 2.42). Sugar (as written) and Monroe (as an iconic Hollywood movie star) combine to create the character in the narrative, and it is difficult for the filmgoer to separate the two. So, as Sugar sings “I’m Through with Love” near the end of the film, it speaks to both Sugar’s heartbreak and Monroe’s, who as a public figure was famously unlucky at



2.42 Marilyn Monroe on the set of *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959). Seeing her captured here in a moment of reverie, we can see how singing a song like “I’m Through with Love” might speak not only for Sugar Kane, the character she plays in the film, but for Monroe (the movie star, the woman) as well.



2.43 Jason Statham as Frank Martin in *The Transporter 2* (Louis LeTerrier, 2005). It's hard to imagine anyone else playing the part.

love. As filmgoers we can't help but see the movie star in the character and the character in the movie star. Indeed, in many ways the movie exploits the complication.

The indelible and enduring nature of Monroe's stardom is at the heart of the 2011 film *My Week with Marilyn* (Simon Curtis). Indeed the film's narrative is built upon the familiarity of Monroe as a celebrity whose public and private life remains a fascination to many moviegoers. The film features Michelle Williams in a platinum-blond wig and skin-tight dresses, speaking in that little-girl-lost whisper that became Monroe's trademark. The character "Marilyn" in the film, then, is a re-presentation of the Marilyn we have come to "know" through her films—*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953), *The Seven Year Itch* (Billy Wilder, 1955), *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), *The Misfits* (John Huston, 1961)—through ruminations on her life on and off screen (e.g., Norman Mailer's 1973 biography *Marilyn* and Joyce Carol Oates's historical novel *Blonde*, first published in 2000), and the tell-all celebrity gossip that accompanied her stardom and has endured, astonishingly, ever since. Just as it was difficult to separate the real Marilyn from the woman up there on screen in *Some Like It Hot*, in *My Week with Marilyn* it is difficult to distinguish Williams's characterization of Monroe from the real thing. The story told in the film depends on Williams's evocation of the familiar look and style of Monroe, the movie star. We thus read the narrative already knowing the character, constructed as it is from the mythology of Marilyn Monroe as a troubled, needy young woman consumed by Hollywood stardom. What the film then adds is nuance to that legend, depicting the actress off screen as manipulative and ambitious, driven by insecurities so complex they baffled and frustrated everyone in her life.

Movie stars are often associated with a signature role: Sylvester Stallone as Rocky, for example, or

Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones. For reasons that extend beyond the character as written, the movie star makes the role his or hers. Imagine, for example, *The Transporter* films with someone else besides Jason Statham in the lead role. His character, Frank Martin, as written is somewhat flat; he spends most of the films seated at the wheel of his gorgeous Audi, driving. Statham gives Frank an identity, one tied into the way the actor carries himself as a movie star (and former athlete and fashion model),

his rugged good looks, even the way he wears his suit (fig. 2.43).

Film theorists talk about a movie star's "discrete identity," the public persona—drawn from gossip, self-promotion, and other movie roles—that inevitably leaks into the portrayal of the fictional characters they portray. In the 1930s and 1940s in Hollywood, movie stars were often typecast or pigeonholed; they played the same basic character in every one of their films. So, for example, the actor Errol Flynn played the rebel Robin Hood (fig. 2.44) and the boxer Gentlemen Jim Corbett—two historical characters separated by centuries—much the same way. Both characters as played by Flynn are risk takers, swash-bucklers, lovers, and fighters with an indomitable spirit. Both characters have only a passing relation to the real historical figures they are based upon but are very much tied into Flynn's discrete identity as a romantic leading man with a reputation off screen as a lovable rogue.



2.44 Errol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Michael Curtiz and William Keighley, 1938).

2-3 GENRE

Genre is a French term used widely in English-language literary and film criticism. It is an organizing principle that refers to a kind or type of work. In film studies, genre criticism begins with the task of categorizing a group of films that share certain narrative elements, visual style, and/or emotional effects. A film is perceived to be a western, a romantic comedy, a gangster, or a horror film because it appears to be the same kind or type of film as others in that genre.

The critical task of grouping like works of art into genres dates to Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in 350 B.C. Aristotle's primary focus in his discussion of genre was on narrative-based art forms like stage plays and lyric poetry. He organized these traditions into two rather comprehensive categories: comedy and tragedy. These two genres, according to Aristotle, were defined and distinguished from each other on two counts: (1) with regard to constitutive elements (narrative structure, certain key themes and motifs), and (2) with regard to their presumed effect on the audience. Our reactions to tragedy and comedy are distinct and different; we recognize whether we've seen a tragedy or comedy based in part on the structure and content of its story and plot and also with regard to what and how the story makes us feel.

Well over 2,000 years later, the same basic distinguishing characteristics are in play when we critically discuss motion pictures: We recognize genre films—that is, films that can be organized into genres—by their

western A film genre that is recognized and understood based on its narrative elements: the characters (cowboys, American Indians, gunslingers, and outlaws), the setting (the wide-open spaces, the saloon), and certain narrative events (the inevitable gunplay).

horror A film genre that is recognized and understood based on the effect the narrative has on us, and how the events and characters create the desired sense of suspense and dread.



2.45 Four cowboys meet on a dusty street with a sign for a saloon in the background. We recognize from these constituent elements that the film is a western. *Tombstone* (George P. Cosmatos, 1993).

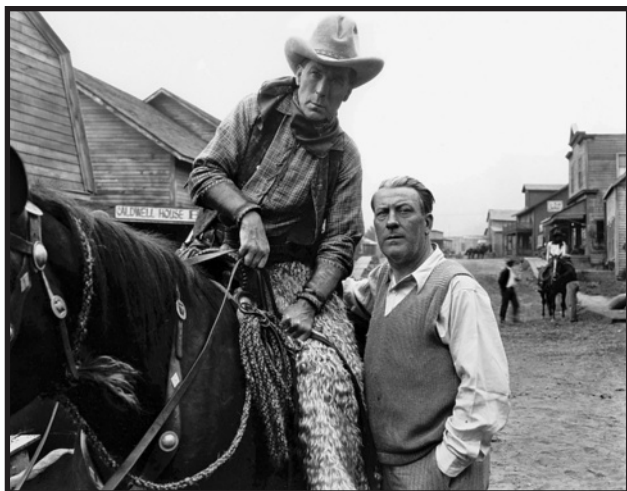


2.46 Genre defined by its effect: the scary climax of the 1978 horror film *Halloween* (John Carpenter).

formulaic narrative elements and/or by their effects on us. We collectively recognize a **western**, for example, based on its narrative elements: the characters (cowboys, American Indians, gunslingers, and outlaws), the setting (the wide-open spaces, the saloon), and certain narrative events (the inevitable gunplay) (fig. 2.45). We are more apt to recognize a **horror film** from the effect the narrative has on us, and how the events and characters create the desired sense of suspense and dread (fig. 2.46). After all, the term *horror* is derived from words meaning “to shudder” and “to stand on end.”

2-3a Form and Formula: The Western

Westerns are composed of familiar images, sounds, and stories. They may well be attractive and popular because



2.47 Early western movie star William S. Hart with the director King Baggot on the set of *Tumbleweeds* (1925).

they are so familiar; we find comfort or pleasure or both in recognition and repetition, and we like to have our expectations satisfied. In an otherwise chaotic world, we find comfort in the ordered universe of genre fiction.

Because genres hinge on conventions and expectations, recognition is a key. We know we're in a western, for example, even though few of us have ever met a real cowboy and even though very few filmgoers were alive during the time period covered by the genre (roughly 1840–1920; from the embrace of the notion of Manifest Destiny through the resolution of the Mexican Revolution and so-called Indian Wars). What we recognize then is not a place or story we have experienced first-hand, but instead a familiar set of images and a tradition of storytelling.

To appreciate and understand the western, we must first recognize the constituent elements specific to the genre. First and foremost we have the cowboy: a man with a gun and a horse (fig. 2.47). He is defined less by what he does (for a living, for example) than what he is (a cowboy) and what he represents (freedom from material possessions, freedom from domesticity, freedom from institutional authority). For filmgoers overseas, the cowboy became the American *par excellence*; but for the American moviegoer, the cowboy is very much a figure in a popular mythology, an idealization of masculine behavior in a world that exists only in the movies (fig. 2.48).

Women also fit into stereotypical or archetypal roles in the western and as such tend to be peripheral to the action. Unlike stories in other heroic genres, in westerns women are seldom the object



2.48 John Wayne, the quintessential American cowboy, in John Ford's 1939 western *Stagecoach*.

of the hero's quest. Instead they exist as distractions, as sexual outlets, and as “civilizers” who promise or threaten to transform the cowboy into a modern married man. The very convention of marriage that offers a significant rite of passage in modern American life marks the death of the cowboy; “settling down” is something he doesn't or can't do without hanging up his guns and changing his ways.

The setting or space of the western is immediately recognizable on screen: the wide-open prairies with mountains looming in the distance, the tumbleweeds, the big sky (fig. 2.49). The cowboy is often depicted against such a majestic natural backdrop—a lone individual in an untamed land. Scattered in the wilderness we find lonely homesteads and slowly developing towns—tentative attempts to civilize the virgin land. As a consequence, exteriors tend to dominate the genre, so much so that interiors (the saloon, the hearth) gain unique



2.49 The space of the western. *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956).

importance. We recognize the space of the western not because we have been there but because we have seen these spaces in other movie westerns.

The vast majority of westerns fit into a handful of basic narrative formulas. The hero is most likely an outsider or at least he is different from those he ends up protecting. He is adept at gunplay; he is a survivor in a ruthless and rugged place. The villains are nearly as adept, and the struggle between the hero and villain at once involves the western society (the townsfolk, the homesteaders) and takes shape without their direct involvement. The western narrative often comes down to a struggle between personifications of good and evil. The hero and his nemesis are more than just two men with guns facing off to settle some personal dispute. Instead, by the time they face off on a dusty street or in a dimly lit saloon, their confrontation comes to embody larger notions of justice, vengeance, and the necessary victory of good over evil (fig. 2.50).

Indeed, the themes that westerns typically explore can be expressed in terms of competing values or concepts: progress (or modernity) versus nostalgia, sex versus love, the male bond versus the male ideal of isolation. Violence has a specific function in the western as a means of establishing social control that is simple and effective but nonetheless short-lived. Civilization and modernity will, we know, win out in the west; as such the genre is essentially nostalgic . . . a longing for simpler times.

2-3b Form and Effect: The Horror Film

Horror films hinge upon a predictable reaction to visual, aural, and narrative elements; we know we're watching a horror film because we recognize its effect on us. Because it so hinges upon effect, the genre raises two fundamental questions: First, how can anyone be frightened by a movie? After all, the world on screen does not exist. Second, why would anyone go to a horror film knowing in advance that he or she will be horrified, and that the film will likely prompt an unpleasant reaction such as disgust, nausea, repugnance, or fear?

The answer to the first question may be a simple matter of what scholars call a "willing suspension of disbelief"; we know we are witnesses to the staging of



2.50 The inevitable, climactic gunfight in a dimly lit saloon: Shane (foreground) faces off against Wilson (background) to settle things once for and all. *Shane* (George Stevens, 1952).

a work of fiction, but we rather easily accept this world on its own terms, with its own rules, characters, and plotlines.

The answer to the second question regards the curious attraction of things that promise to frighten us, from roller coasters to haunted houses. It also regards the public ritual of going to the movies; horror films are built on suspense and shock, both of which depend on audience expectation and succeed once they prompt audience reaction. Sharing this expectation and reaction with other filmgoers heightens the genre's inevitable effect.

The stories told in horror movies target a virtual catalogue of human weaknesses and fears (figs. 2.51–2.58)—fears of the unknown, of human frailty



2.51 The fear of losing control, the fear of going crazy, the fear of demonic possession: *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973).



2.52 The fear of others: *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922).



2.53 The fear of the dark, the fear of getting lost: *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999).



2.54 The fear of disease and death: *Let the Right One In* (*Låt der rätte komma in*, Tomas Alfredson, 2008).



2.55 The fear of social transgression, of growing up too fast, of risky sex: *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978).

(dismemberment, demonic possessions), of others (people unlike us, people or monsters with unsavory origins from strange places with strange habits), or of disease and death (zombies existing in a permanent disease state, vampires existing somehow between conventional notions of life and death). Horror need not involve the supernatural. Common phobias are often at the heart of the matter: fear of heights, of enclosed spaces, of strangers, of losing control (e.g., demonic possession), of getting lost in the woods. Also in play is the larger matter of crime and punishment: sex outside of marriage and its punishment in teen horror films, science messing with God's work of creation in the many *Frankenstein* films, and fears of our own nature or psychology (that we may be capable of some hideous act, that a monster resides inside us waiting to be awakened or released) as in the classic horror story *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which has been made and remade on screen several times. Finally, horror often hinges upon a belief in bad luck or fate, the fundamental notion that pretty much anything could happen to anyone at any time.



2.56 The fear of science. *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935).



2.57 The fear of our own worst instincts: Is there something inside of us that can be awakened and exploited? *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919).

A close look at twenty-first-century horror films such as *Saw* and *Hostel* suggests that we're a lot harder to scare than we used to be; filmmakers now go to gruesome extremes to deliver thrills. It is fair to wonder

what is entertaining about these films. Also popular today are horror parodies—the *Scream* films for example, or the *Scary Movie* franchise, that poke fun at the genre's conventions. Because these parodies can elicit fear and laughter at the same time, they prompt us to ask if we have somehow equated being horrified with being amused, and to consider what this might say about the modern condition.

2-3c The Social Function of Genre

A number of film historians, critics, and theorists contend that the primary function of genre is to offer a familiar narrative frame for a contemporary social commentary. As such, genre films function much as myths do: they translate lived experience into stories that help us understand ourselves—our aspirations, our longing, our struggle with the essential conflicts and paradoxes of contemporary life.

To see how this works, let's look at the two genres discussed in detail previously: westerns and horror films. Though westerns are set in a specific historical place and time in the distant past, at stake are fairly universal themes: good versus evil, family versus work, civilization versus wilderness. Genre critics contend that the conflict between cowboys and American Indians we see in these films tells us less about nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny and the real Indian Wars than about race in contemporary America. This is certainly clear in John Ford's 1956 film *The Searchers*,

released just two years after the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* that mandated the racial integration of American schools. The film's most adept cowboy is Ethan Edwards, a racist. He



2.58 The fear of bad luck: “There is no coincidence,” a gypsy fortune teller informs Lawrence Talbot, “only fate . . .” *The Wolfman* (Joe Johnston, 2010).

undertakes the search for his teenage niece Debbie, who has been kidnapped by the Comanche war chief Scar. Ethan’s motivation, initially at least, is not to execute her rescue but to put her out of her misery, to kill her and in doing so save her from the shame of miscegenation. Along the way we get several glimpses at Ethan’s unreasoned hatred of Native Americans in general.

The film ends as Ethan finally finds Debbie after killing Scar’s band of renegades. At the moment when we (and she) fear the worst, he has a brief but nonetheless highly sentimentalized change of heart. The image of Ethan lifting Debbie over his head and then letting her drop lovingly into his arms, punctuated by



2.59 *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) is clearly about race and racism but not necessarily, or not only, about cowboys and Indians.

the single line of dialogue “Let’s go home, Debbie,” reveals the disconnect between his previous statements about race and his necessary actions as a western hero (fig. 2.59). *The Searchers* is ostensibly about a cowboy and a band of renegade American Indians, but its narrative attention to race had a much more modern referent. In the liberal fantasy evinced by this genre narrative, Ethan discovers the folly of racism.

Screenwriters and directors also turned to genre films in the mid-twentieth century as a way to comment on the Hollywood blacklist, which they were forbidden to address directly. These films

offered a metaphorical, as opposed to literal, attack on the industrywide ban (from roughly 1947 through 1959) on the employment of over 300 writers, directors, producers, and actors suspected of having communist political sympathies. In *High Noon*, for example, the hero Will Kane refuses to turn his back on the town he has sworn to protect, even though the folks he protects may not be worth the trouble (fig. 2.60). At one point a character remarks to Kane, “This is no time for a civics lesson,” but that’s precisely what the film offers. The cowboy hero is true to genre form: he believes that a man is only as good as his word. But much as this philosophy fits the genre formula, it was a profoundly resonant position to take in 1952, given the various efforts afoot to get Hollywood talent to inform on one another.

A less subtle genre reframing of the blacklist can be found in Nicholas Ray’s 1954 western *Johnny Guitar*. The film begins with a lynch mob, a not unusual story element for a western, but Ray uses this motif several times in the film to reveal the essential injustices— invasion of privacy, guilt by innuendo, loss of life or livelihood—that occur whenever a mob smells blood. The film climaxes with the interrogation of a young outlaw named Turkey, who is beaten



2.60 By the end of *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), the strong and silent cowboy is exhausted by the burden of being a hero in such a cowardly and treacherous town. The film is set in the Wild West, but the town is clearly meant to represent Hollywood during the blacklist.



2.61 Turkey is interrogated in *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954). He betrays Vienna to save himself. The mob hangs him anyway . . . no doubt an allegory for what was happening to those hauled in front of the committees charged with enforcing Hollywood's blacklist.

into falsely implicating the film's heroine, a businesswoman named Vienna, in a bank robbery (fig. 2.61). While the coercive tactics used in service of the blacklist stopped short of physical violence, the parallels are clear.

The various fears that lay at the heart of horror film narratives—fear of the dark, fear of strangers, fear of death and disease, and so on—may also allude to social issues. For example, *Nosferatu* depicts the vampire as an unwanted immigrant whose arrival poses a sexual and biological threat to Germany: he has designs on the very flower of German womanhood, and he has brought with him a contagion that ravages the population (fig. 2.52). In 1922, when the film was released, there were political and social movements in Germany, including the nascent Nazi Party, demonizing foreigners, immigrants, and Jews. More modern examples of horror films touching on social issues are the teen horror films beginning in the 1970s with *Carrie* and *Halloween* that exploit basic fears (of the unknown, of monstrous evil and psychopathology) to focus our attention on more general adolescent worries about bullying and unprotected sex.

Carrie tells the story of a lonely high school girl who is tortured by her classmates and by her fanatically religious mother. Carrie's role as an outcast is made worse by the fact that there's something clearly "different" about her. It is of course fair to ask, what high school student doesn't at some point feel "different?" But Carrie is really different from her classmates: she's telekinetic. She can, when angry, make objects move, even fly through the air.



2.62 Carrie (screen right), the girl everybody loves to pick on, gets her revenge on her teachers and fellow students (screen left) in the film adaptation of Stephen King's horror story about bullying and sexuality among small town teenagers. *Carrie* (Brian DePalma, 1976).

The torments that she suffers from her bullying classmates finally trigger within Carrie a power that no one, not even she, foresees at the beginning of the movie. In the film's climactic scene, Carrie's anger and humiliation at a final, horrifying insult—a bucket of pig's blood dumped on her head during a school dance—propels her over the edge. Eyes popping out

and her body clenched in psychic rage, she lays waste to the entire school (fig. 2.62). A wish-fulfillment allegory for every person who has ever been bullied or humiliated and a cautionary tale for the popular set, *Carrie* deftly appealed to the anxieties and fears of adolescents about interpersonal relationships and the hormonal nightmare of adolescent sexuality.

In *Halloween* we again focus on the downside of teen sexuality, here policed by an irrational, super- or sub-human violence (fig. 2.55). The film poses a simple narrative: if you have sex, you die. The link that *Halloween* established between teen sex and irrational violence became the hallmark of a

new subgenre, the slasher film. Not only do these films adhere to genre convention by successfully scaring audiences, they also deliver a very contemporary, cautionary message about the perils of teen sexuality (STDs, AIDS, unwanted pregnancies), suggesting a cosmic payback for the sexual revolution of the late sixties and early seventies.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

When we analyze a film's narrative, we look at the ways that events are sequenced and connected, how narrative time operates at various levels, and how characters function and are developed through dialogue as well as action.

2-1 NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Learning Outcome: *Recognize and analyze the narrative structure of a film.*

- Narrative structure encompasses both the full set of events that we piece together as viewers (the story) and the events that are presented in the film (the plot). In other words, the plot is a particular selection and arrangement of events from the story.
- There is a distinction between plot order, the sequence of events adopted in the telling of the tale, and story order, which refers to the chronological sequence of narrative events.
- The three-act structure is a common mode for building a narrative arc or shape. In act 1 expectations are raised. In the second act expectations are confounded. And in the third act expectations are resolved (requited, dismissed, found to be silly), ideally in a mildly surprising fashion.
- The three-act formula roughly matches the hero narrative. This paradigm, which has roots in Greek mythology, involves three stages: the hero ventures forth, he faces a trial, and in the end he returns home having learned something from his journey.
- Many film narratives employ a dual structure: what screenwriters call A and B, or kernel and satellite, stories. This formula prioritizes one of the narratives but simultaneously tracks a second story.
- Story duration refers to the elapse of time from the first to the final events relevant to the tale being told. Plot duration is composed of selected stretches of story duration—a highlight reel of sorts. A third distinction, screen duration, regards the passage of time involved in the screening of the film.

2-2 CHARACTERS

Learning Outcome: *Understand and appreciate the narrative function of movie characters and movie stars.*

- Our understanding of film characters is mostly based on external, physical, observable details: appearance, gestures, dialogue, actions. Actors endeavor to help us

understand the inner lives of characters through their expression of these details.

- Recognizable character types have been an essential aspect of film narrative since the advent of cinema. If we are watching a western, for example, we recognize the hero instinctively, just as we recognize his adversary.
- Dialogue, what the characters say within the world of the story, and narration, commentary from outside the story, often guide our reading of and feelings about characters and their roles in the larger narrative.
- Unlike the characters in literary works, screen characters are embodied; that is, we do not imagine what they look like from a description, but rather they come to us in visible, tangible form. Movie stars complicate this phenomenon as we consider their public persona and their roles in previous films whenever we see them on screen.

2-3 GENRE

Learning Outcome: *Distinguish and discuss the concept of genre with regard to the structure and effect of film narrative.*

- Genre is an organizing principle that refers to a kind or type of work. In film studies, *genre* refers to a group of films that share certain narrative elements, visual style, and/or emotional effects.
- Genre offers a familiar narrative frame for a contemporary social commentary. Many genre films function much as myths do: they translate lived experience into stories that help us understand ourselves—our aspirations, our longings, our struggles with the essential conflicts and paradoxes of contemporary life.

FOCUS on Story and Genre: *Double Indemnity*

Reading a movie script reminds us that the mode of telling that story on screen—the images and sounds—can only be approximated or suggested by the written word. With that caveat, we will look at an excerpt from the screenplay for Billy Wilder's 1944 crime film *Double Indemnity*. It is the climactic scene of the movie where the insurance man Walter confronts the treacherous *femme fatale* Phyllis. They have conspired to kill her husband for an insurance payoff, but after that deed was performed, Phyllis has played Walter for a sucker, a fairly typical 1940s crime film plotline.

Earlier in the film, Walter compared acting out a murder to riding on a trolley . . . that when two people conspire to commit such a crime they need to stay on the trolley and stick by one another (and one another's stories) to the bitter end. Both characters have gotten off the trolley at this point. Note how the hard-boiled dialogue maintains the noir, crime-film milieu and yet also manages to pack an emotional punch.

The simple action of turning his back to her heightens the suspense—we've seen her hide a pistol under the seat cushion of her chair.

We know that Phyllis has shot Walter without ever seeing her fire the gun. We see events unfold first by seeing Walter's face and then from a shot of Phyllis holding the gun from Walter's point of view. The suspense builds as we wonder if she will fire again.

Tough guy banter: an element of the crime genre. He is angry and taunting her.

Another pregnant pause that builds suspense.

Despite a bullet in the gut, more tough guy banter.

She is not acting the cold-hearted *femme fatale* now. We, like Walter, want to know why.

Phyllis just stares at him. He goes quietly over to the window and shuts it and draws the curtain. Phyllis speaks to his back:

PHYLLIS
(her voice low and urgent)

Walter!

Walter turns, something changes in his face. There is the report of a gun. He stands motionless for a moment, then very slowly starts towards her. CAMERA IS OVER HIS SHOULDER AT Phyllis as she stands with the gun in her hand. Walter stops after he has taken a few steps.

WALTER

What's the matter? Why don't you shoot again? Maybe if I came a little closer?

Walter takes a few more steps towards her and stops again.

WALTER (cont'd.)

How's that? Do you think you can do it now?

Phyllis is silent. She doesn't shoot. Her expression is tortured. Walter goes on until he is close to her. Quietly he takes the gun out of her unresisting hand.

WALTER (cont'd.)

Why didn't you shoot, baby?

A key gesture that signals her character's third act change of heart.

Phyllis puts her arms around him in complete surrender.

WALTER (cont'd.)

Given Phyllis's prior deceptions, we too wonder if she is pretending.

Don't tell me it's because you've been in love with me.

PHYLLIS

Is she telling the truth? Her admission of guilt makes the change of heart convincing to us, if not to Walter.

No. I never loved you, Walter. Not you or anybody else. I'm rotten to the heart. I used you, just as you said. That's all you ever meant to me—until a minute ago. I didn't think anything like that could ever happen to me.

WALTER

I'm sorry baby. I'm not buying.

PHYLLIS

I'm not asking you to buy. Just hold me close.

The kiss does not lead to reconciliation, as it would in a romance. It is important that she learns that she hasn't gotten away with murder.

Walter draws her close to him. She reaches up to his face and kisses him on the lips. As she comes out of the kiss there is realization in her eyes that this is the final moment.

WALTER

Goodbye baby.

Predictably, closure is attained when the criminals are punished (they both die). The mild surprise of the third act is that Walter is the one who kills Phyllis.

Out of the shot the gun explodes once, twice ...

DOUBLE INDEMNITY: THE COMPLETE SCREENPLAY, Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler. University of California Press, 2000.

ANALYZE NARRATIVE AND GENRE

Use these questions to analyze how the basic elements of narrative and genre contribute to the form and meaning of a film.

- Film narratives often refer directly or indirectly to a contemporary issue. Does the film you are analyzing refer to a larger political, social, or economic reality?

2-1 NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

- Does the plot order match the story order? If not, list the differences and discuss how these changes from story to plot order contribute to the narrative.
- Briefly summarize the arc or shape of the narrative. Can you organize the events into a three-act structure? Can you identify a so-called narrative fix, or central conflicts that create the drama in the story? Is closure accomplished?
- Does the story adhere to the hero narrative proposed by Joseph Campbell?
- Does the film have discernable A and B (or kernel and satellite) stories, or does it have parallel narratives? If so, how do these stories relate to one other?
- What parts of the story have been left out of the plot? How do the omissions contribute to the telling of the film's story?

2-2 CHARACTERS

- How would you describe each character's motivations? How does his or her motivation contribute to his or her development as a character? How does his or her motivation contribute to the telling of the film's story? Are any character's motivations unclear or surprising and, if so, how does this questioning of character motivation contribute to the telling of the film's story?
- Do any of the film's characters fall into discernable types (e.g., the all-American hero, the nutty professor)? If so, how are these types used in the telling of the film's story?
- Focus on a scene involving a dialogue between two or more characters. What does the dialogue tell you about the characters?
- Are any of the characters played by a movie star? If so, how does the movie star's discrete identity—his or her biography and previous film roles—affect your reading of the film character and the film as a whole?

2-3 GENRE

- Select a genre film to analyze. What elements of story, plot, character, setting and/or emotional effect are associated with that genre?
- How are conventions and expectations fulfilled by the movie? Are any genre conventions tweaked or thwarted, offered in variation, or contradicted?
- Is the genre narrative used to offer a social commentary?